

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

The rise of the 'Nones': Rethinking religious communities

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Last week, I wrote on the trend of "The Rise of the Nones," a phrase that points to the increasing amount of people leaving institutionalized religion — "Nones" being an umbrella category that includes everyone from atheists to believers who left the church.

In the article last week, I showed that while "the Rise of the Nones" may cause concern and paint a picture of spiritually-empty young people, the reality is that the rise of nonreligious and unaffiliated has actually led to exciting, creative and even spiritual ways of building community.

But another part of this conversation is how those of us within religious institutions can learn from Nones in order to enrich the religious traditions that they originally left.

It might seem counter-logical for institutions to try to learn from those who are leaving their houses of worship, but in order to sustain their organizations moving forward, it seems essential to listen to the desires of these emerging generations.

One such voice is Nathan Schneider, a journalist and young intellectual who has covered religion for publications includ-



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ing America Magazine and more.

Earlier this year, Schneider visited Grand Rapids to discuss his own millennial faith story: raised in an interfaith family, he converted to Catholicism at the age of 18, and has thus constructed an identity that holds a tension between the inclusive desires of millennials and the comfort of particular tradition, something that spoke to many of the students who attended the event.

One theme of discussion was how institutions, such as his own Catholic tradition, can meaningfully and authentically center youth voices into their religious life.

He suggested one way to sustain religious communities, particularly religious orders that are diminishing in numbers, is to connect the currents of youth culture to the needs of religious communities.

This alignment of trends has occurred across our country and in various communities. At Catholic Abbeys in Virginia, monks and nuns were able to employ sustainable practices and renewable energy sources to save money and live out their

values in new ways.

At a formerly abandoned convent in New York City, a lay woman worked alongside Catholic Workers and Dominican Volunteers to create Benincasa Community, which houses lay community members and homeless guests.

These holy spaces, open to change, were able to re-create themselves and live into their religious principles while responding to the needs of their community and engaging the emerging generation.

These stories caused Schneider to pose the question: If you had the ability to determine the future of a religious space, a house of worship, a plot of land, what would you do with it?

He asked us to be creative, and thus empowered us to re-envision our own roles within seemingly unchangeable religious institutions.

How could we "hold and transform the charisms" to help move religious communities into the future, alongside those who have carried the traditions to where they are today?

From responding to housing needs in an increasingly expensive city, or pointing to the power of community gardens to utilize land and promote sustainability while build-

ing relationships, there was no shortage of inspiration in imagining how our local religious institutions can respond to needs and engage new trends.

As Krista Tippett has suggested, young people who are passionate about social issues have the potential to bring fresh perspectives into houses of worship, helping point traditions back to their own "untamable, countercultural, service-oriented heart."

The questions for our communities, then, have increasing importance.

How can our religious institutions consider the issues that young people raise within and outside of religious communities? What would it look like to center and empower the emerging generation's voices? When will we allow re-visioning to take place, and where will that re-visioning take us? Finally, how can we do this inter-generationally — learning from our elders, listening to our youth and led by our collective community?

The potential for these conversations to grow our communities, and thus ourselves as individuals, is unbound. But it first requires that we ask the questions, and welcome the answers.

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